DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 399 566 CS 215 504

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TITLE Collaborative Conclusions: Involving Students in the Evaluation Process.
PUB DATE Mar 96
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (47th, Milwaukee, WI, March 27-30, 1996).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Evaluation Criteria; Evaluation Methods; Evaluation Problems; *Freshman Composition; *Grading; Higher Education; Portfolio Assessment; *Student Evaluation; Student Needs; *Student Participation; Teacher Student Relationship; *Writing Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS *Alternative Assessment; Grids

ABSTRACT

Most freshman composition instructors have to field student inquiries and complaints about grades. Research and thought about alternative methods of evaluation can help lessen this burden. Grading holistically, team and partner grading, and portfolio grading are all effective methods. Often the instructor's evaluation "language" can cause difficulty. Students can help in determining the guidelines by which they will be judged. Through a series of steps, students can be engaged in the process. Among these are asking students to write about what "good writing" is, having them brainstorm on the blackboard, and then having them provide examples of "good writing" to be read aloud and discussed. A survey is then designed based on these classroom activities, and the answers are used to construct a response sheet or grading grid with general categories that outline the criteria agreed upon in class. Teacher comments, including emotional or intellectual reactions to the writing, can be written in the margin or at the end of the paper. Grids are a way to satisfy students' hunger for ranking without giving conventional grades on individual papers. (CR)

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ED 399 566

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CCCC's Paper
Milwaukee, WI
1996

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"Collaborative Conclusions: Involving Students in the Evaluation Process"

During the years that I have been teaching composition at the college level, I have tried to embrace the role of "teacher as facilitator." Yet, I have discovered that the moment that I am forced into the role of "teacher as evaluator," the relationship that I have tried to foster with my students is shattered. Inevitably, for most of the students, the "evaluation" creates an atmosphere of distrust, confusion, pain, or anger. Students and teachers both suffer from the necessity of evaluation. And while many of us have adopted the ideology of the "teacher as facilitator," few of us have been able to continue this role through the grading process.

Most Freshman Composition instructors, myself included, have had to field student inquiries and complaints about the "grade." A couple of years ago, I started researching alternative methods of evaluation to help lessen this burden. In the past, I have graded holistically, and have team and partner graded. But these options have not always been available. A few

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years ago, I began to use portfolio grading in a "developmental" writing course, and have since continued using this method exclusively. While the portfolio method has been a more effective means of evaluation than some of my previous trials, grading continues to be an area where communication between teacher and student is difficult.

More and more, I have realized that this difficulty is the result of a difference in "language." My evaluation language belonged to textbooks and composition instructors. As such, my comments were reinforcing an elite classroom model that I had been trying to deconstruct. What good was peer work, revision, conferences, and personal writing when the essays were being evaluated with a language that was as mystical to them as Latin? I needed to engage my students in the evaluation "process" as well, and the most logical way to do this was to involve them in the creation of the grading criteria for the classroom. I've had to do this myself whenever I teach a class. I've created criteria with partners and groups of people for grading and placement examinations, but never before had I included my students in determining the guidelines by which they would be judged.

In the process of creating the criteria the students discovered that they knew what "good" writing was and that they had been for some time, critics of it. I believe the experience increased both the students' and my

own understanding of each others' discourse communities, demystifying my evaluative comments, and removing the spectre of the Tower of Babel from the classroom.

Our collaboration on the grading criteria begins on the first day of classes. I ask the students at this time to freewrite on the question: "what is good writing?" Students immediately ask: "what do you mean by good?" I encourage them not to worry about what I am looking for, but to answer the question as they want to. On the following day I instruct them to write an essay describing "good" writing. This generally takes up much of the time in the fifty-minute class period, yet when I pick up the papers, many of the students have only written two or three paragraphs.

At our third meeting, I ask the students to brainstorm with me on the board about "good" writing. Once we have the board full, we talk about some of the misconceptions of writing, especially things they may have discussed in their papers from the day before. In their essays, they usually devote themselves to the concerns of perfect spelling, punctuation, grammar, and sometimes, penmanship, and "good margins." Some state that good writing is a clear expression of one's ideas. Still, even in these few examples a declaration of the importance of mechanics takes center stage.

I next ask my students to bring in vivid examples of writing that they think is good. We read these aloud, sharing our ideas about what we like in each piece. This has three functions. The first is to illustrate to them that no one, not even the English teacher, likes "boring" writing, or that other writers besides those often considered the classically "good" ones share some common characteristics that we can learn from. I purposely bring in a piece to share from a popular novel or magazine. I model for the class by responding to my piece out loud. Why does it touch me? Why do I like it? How can I identify its strengths? What do I identify them as? When the students go through this process they establish themselves as evaluators and critics, even though they don't realize this right away, and this is the exercise's second function. Often these questions appear during their group meetings. And in classes where we collaborate on the criteria., peer comments are more focused and developed. The third function of this exercise is to show them that "good" writing is more than spelling and grammar, that this is not my primary concern when I look at their writing, and that while the notions of good writing are subjective, they may share some common characteristics.

After class, I design a survey based on the brainstorming on the board and their essays. At the next meeting, I ask them to answer the

questions of the survey by checking the statements about writing that they agree with. Often many do not check statements that they either themselves proposed or agreed with in class. Generally, when I question them about this, they answer that they thought I was looking for something else, or that I wanted "big words" or "terms." Examples on the survey try to capture the students' language, for example: "paragraphs should have lots of details; I need to see what the author is trying to describe or explain. It helps me understand new ideas better, then I can really understand what picture the writer is drawing for me. I feel that they are talking directly to me."

After collecting data from the survey we construct a response sheet or grading grid (whichever the students as a whole feel most comfortable with) with general categories that outline the criteria that we come up with in class. I believe that this is the most democratic and accurate way to represent our agreed upon criteria. I ask that I be allowed one suggestion for the criteria, as a voting member of the class; in this way I can cover anything that I feel is necessary to the course objectives that may have been overlooked in our discussions.

The collaborative criteria has had moderate to excellent success in the times that I've used it. I provide a numerical score, either on the response sheet or grid. Hence the students have something to hold onto that is not a

grade but represents an idea of where they stand before they work on their final revisions. Students can focus on areas where they are weak, and take pride in areas where they are strong in their writing. As a reader, I can use these response sheets or grids to address the students' need to know "how they are doing," while using the margin or the end of the paper to express my emotional or intellectual reaction to the writing. This allows me to play the facilitator/evaluator role simultaneously.

In 1993, about the time I first started devising collaborative criteria, I came across Peter Elbow's essay "Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking: Sorting Three Forms of Judgment." In the essay, Elbow expresses his frustration with students' obsession with grades and offers the analytic grid as a way to address this problem:

> Grids are a way I can satisfy the student's hunger for ranking
> but still not give into conventional grades on individual papers.
> Sometimes I provide nothing but a grid (especially on final drafts)
> and this is a very quick way to provide a response.
> Or on midprocess drafts I sometimes use a grid in addition
> to a comment that often doesn't so much tell them what's
> wrong or right or how to improve things, but rather
> tries to give them an account of what is happening to me

> as I read their words. I think this kind of comment is really the most useful thing for all students, but it frustrates some students for awhile. The grid can help these students feel less anxious and pay better attention to my comment. (195)

In my classroom, the grid or response sheet acts as a way to separate judgment and response for the students while allowing me to negotiate my roles as facilitator and evaluator. As Elbow suggests it is "uncoupling them from the grade" (196). And it seems that if we allow the students to participate in the formation of the criteria, they can concentrate even more on their own writing rather than their "grade." Elbow states further that he varies his grids for different assignments. The first time I used the collaborative criteria, I hadn't really taken this into account. Nevertheless, I was alerted to my neglect by several students, who when they handed in an essay with their criteria sheet, crossed out a few of the categories and replaced them with those that their group had decided were more appropriate to the assignment. This occurred in my "developmental" writing course. They realized on their own that we have to adapt our criteria to a situation and audience. This was an indication to me that not only were they being drawn into the goals of the class, but that their overall understanding of writing was broadening, and that their critical thinking skills were

developing. They showed more forethought regarding the criteria then I had; illustrating that not only did they "own" their essays, but that they owned this class.

After the first essay is nearing its final drafts, I ask students to get into their peer groups, and have them respond to each others' papers the same way that I'll have to with the grids or response sheets. They begin to see how difficult this task is. But more importantly, it takes them through the entire process of the paper, and reinforces their ability to communicate about their essays with me and have a voice in the class. During each essay we go through a similar exercise, so that students can use my responses and their peers' to revise their paper.

Why is it important that the students understand our "language?" Why is it important to include their voice in the classroom? As many scholars and theorists of composition suggest, the writing classroom should be a democracy; it should celebrate and embrace our differences and create a climate of egalitarianism. One of the things keeping me from this in the classroom was what students perceived as English teacher jargon. We declare that everyone should know what a past participle or a thesis is, but how many of us know what a patagium or a salpingectomy is? We cringe when people burden us with their jargon, seeking to exclude us rather than

educate us. Often students are intimidated by our "language" and our unwillingness (as they sometimes see it) to include them in our inner circle. Because they have little or no basis by which they can understand our commentary, problems in communication arise. Language is imperfect even in a writing classroom, and it is just as much our duty to make sure that the student writers understand us, as it for them to make sure that we understand him or her.

At the end of the term, I ask students once again to freewrite on "what is good writing?" Responses that had been two or three sentences turn to paragraphs, even pages. They feel more confident about their own opinions about writing and about their own writing process. One student's first freewrite argued that good writing is "good punctuation and penmanship." Her response was only four sentences long. Her final response was a well-developed essay that traces her writing process and its strengths and weaknesses. A statement from her introduction to this essay reflects the possibilities of collaborative evaluation: "it takes practice, but a person has the ability to make an essay their own."

Works Cited

Elbow, Peter. "Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking: Sorting Out Three Forms of Judgment." *College English.* 55.2 (1993). 187-205